



Maud Powell

“The grand woman of American music”

“What a vast power for good this distinguished artist has been. How she has traveled tens of thousands of miles into the far off places, carrying the message of beautiful music and her gracious and womanly personality wherever she goes. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that there are hundreds of places in this country today and in Canada, way up in the far Northwest, in the Northeast, out-of-the-way places in the South and Southwest where the first knowledge, the first real appreciation for beautiful music was aroused through the playing of Maud Powell. As she grows in years, she seems to be growing in grace, in beauty, and power of musical expression. Her name today is known in every community, in every newspaper office, as well as in hundreds of thousands of homes, and wherever it is known, it is respected, admired, and indeed loved.”

— *John C. Freund, Mephisto’s Musings, Musical America, 31 May 1919*

MAUD POWELL (1867–1920)
2017 will mark the Sesquicentennial of her birth
Recipient of The Recording Academy's
GRAMMY Award for Lifetime Achievement 2014

The legendary American violinist Maud Powell was a woman of many firsts. Even 94 years after her death, she is still breaking barriers and inspiring people throughout the world through her life and artistry.

On January 25, 2014, Maud Powell received The Recording Academy's® Special Merit (GRAMMY) Award for Lifetime Achievement – the first female solo instrumentalist of any music category (genre) to be so honored and only the fourth classical violinist.



The award is presented by vote of The Recording Academy's® National Trustees to performers who, during their lifetimes, have made creative contributions of outstanding artistic significance to the field of recording. In 1904, Maud Powell became the first instrumentalist to record for the Victor Talking Machine Company's Celebrity Artist series (Red Seal label), setting a world-wide standard for violin artistry and performance that endures to this day.

Neil Portnow, President/CEO of The Recording Academy®, stated: "This award recognizes those who have reached the 'pinnacle' of artistic achievement. Maud Powell richly deserves the award."

A musical mastermind, Maud Powell was the first native-born American violinist of either gender to achieve international recognition, ranking among the pre-eminent musicians in the world.

She was as revered in European capitals as much as she was in New York City, Chicago, Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit, Saint Louis, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, for her brilliant artistry, impeccable technique, magnetic personality, and versatile musicianship.

European and American critics ranked her with the masterful Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe and hailed Maud Powell and the decade-younger Fritz Kreisler as the “king and queen” of violinists. She surpassed the skills of her beloved master Joseph Joachim, the greatest violinist of the nineteenth century.

At a time when America was considered a cultural backwater by Europeans, and American-born musicians were regarded with scorn both at home and abroad, the pioneering American violinist gained acceptance for American musicians to take their places in the profession alongside their European colleagues both at home and abroad.

Powell’s undeniable mastery broke new ground for women, making it possible for them to pursue careers in music that had traditionally been closed to them. It was a period when it was almost unheard of for a woman to play the violin, when women were barred from playing in professional symphony orchestras and from conducting. Women were still considered the property of men and could not vote.

Just as significantly, Powell devoted her immense skills, with courage and fortitude, to luring the American public into an appreciation for classical music and the art of violin playing.

John C. Freund, the esteemed editor of *Musical America*, placed Maud Powell’s picture on the front cover of the July 27, 1918 issue with the caption: “Long One of the Most Powerful Forces for Musical Advancement in America.” It is no wonder.



Maud Powell was born on 22 August 1867, in Peru, Illinois, on America's western frontier. She was a pioneer by inheritance. Her grandparents were Methodist missionaries in Ohio, Wisconsin and Illinois before the Civil War. Her father William Bramwell Powell (1836-1904) was a visionary educator, who won a national reputation as superintendent of public schools in Peru, then Aurora, Illinois, and finally in Washington, D.C. Her mother Wilhelmina Bengelstraeter Paul (1843-1925) was an accomplished pianist and gifted amateur composer, whose gender precluded a career in music.

The leader of the woman's suffrage movement Susan B. Anthony was a family friend and Maud's aunts actively participated in the cause. Maud's uncle John Wesley Powell, Civil War hero and explorer of the Grand Canyon, organized the scientific study of the western lands and of the native American Indians as the powerful director of the U.S. Geological Survey and the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology. He founded the Cosmos Club and with Maud's father, the National Geographic Society.

The family moved to Aurora, Illinois, 40 miles west of Chicago, when Maud was three. She received her first piano and violin lessons there. By the age of nine, her obvious talent necessitated study with violinist William Lewis and pianist Agnes Ingersoll in downtown Chicago.



The youngster had to ride the train 40 miles to their studios on her own as her parents couldn't afford to go with her. She endured the ridicule of young boys and the disapproval of many adults as she walked to the train station with her violin and music. Girls were not supposed to play the violin in those days. It wasn't considered "proper." In the 1870s, young Maud was inspired by the appearance of the French-American violin virtuosa Camilla Urso, the only female violinist of note performing in America and one of the very few in the world at that time.

To the astonishment of relatives and friends, the Powells agreed to break up the family to enable thirteen-year-old Maud to study abroad with her mother by her side. From 1881 to 1885 she was mentored in rapid succession by the finest European teachers: Henry Schradieck in Leipzig, Charles Dancla in Paris, and Joseph Joachim in Berlin.



Susan B. Anthony had urged Maud to show the world that “a woman could fiddle as well as a man.” Powell exceeded her highest expectations, for she worked hard at her craft, determined to perform with such technical perfection and commanding musicianship that would crush forever all notions that a woman could not master the violin as well as a man.

The seventeen-year-old artist made a successful European debut, then returned to the United States in 1885.

At that time, there were only five professional orchestras in the United States – Boston Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Theodore Thomas Orchestra, New York Symphony (three of which were conducted by Theodore Thomas). The orchestras were comprised solely of men, primarily of German origin. Engagements were difficult for a woman to obtain and made doubly difficult by the prejudice against American musicians.

Bravely facing the man who stood at the doorway to her future, Powell won over Theodore Thomas, America’s foremost conductor, with her immaculate artistry. He instantly invited her to make her American debut with the New York Philharmonic in November 1885, and to tour with him thereafter. She continued to face and overcome the skepticism of European-born conductors (including Gustav Mahler) and orchestra members until she became one of the most favored of all soloists.



Powell’s life spanned the time when the institutional foundations for America’s cultural and educational achievements were being laid. When she made her debut, there were only two artist managers in New York, concert circuits had not been established throughout the country, competent impresarios and willing sponsoring organizations were hard to find in the towns between the large cities, acceptable concert halls were scarce, and violin recitals were almost unheard of.



Despite these conditions, Powell refused to be lured into a comfortable career in Europe. Facing the challenges of the raw, uncultured American continent, she made it her mission to cultivate a higher and more widespread appreciation for her art by bringing the best in classical music to Americans and Canadians in remote areas as well as the large cultural centers. Despite the hardships of travel and primitive concert conditions, Powell responded to a reporter’s inquiry: “I must carry a message as long as I am able.”

Powell pioneered the violin recital during her annual tours, traveling throughout North America in cigar-smoke-filled rail cars at a time when train travel was still subject to catastrophe, hotel accommodations highly variable, and food served questionable and sometimes completely inedible.



She formed and toured with the Maud Powell String Quartet (1894-95) and later the Maud Powell Trio (1908-09) with which she introduced chamber music to unsophisticated audiences.



Powell gave concerts in small towns along the route between the larger cities, and even made the effort to perform in remote areas “off the beaten track.” She reached out in every direction, believing that all Americans were capable of appreciating higher art forms if properly introduced to them.

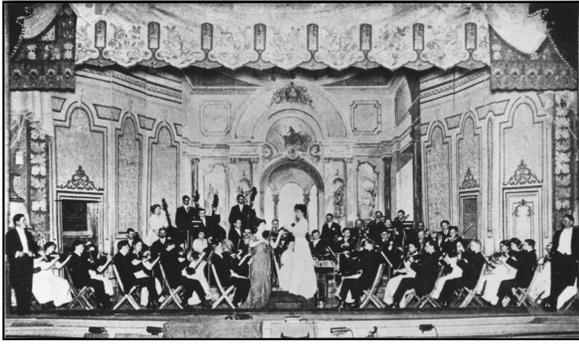
She understood that “popular music is familiar music and the more people hear classical music, the more popular it will become.”

Her engaging recital programs included old and new concertos and sonatas, colorful character pieces, music with toe-tapping rhythms and heart-warming melodies, as well as dazzling technical showpieces. But she never played down to her listeners. She knew “the moment you stoop to them, they do not like it.”

Powell further edified her audiences by initiating the inclusion of recital program notes and even sent the program in advance to music clubs across the country who made it a point of studying the scores before her appearance.

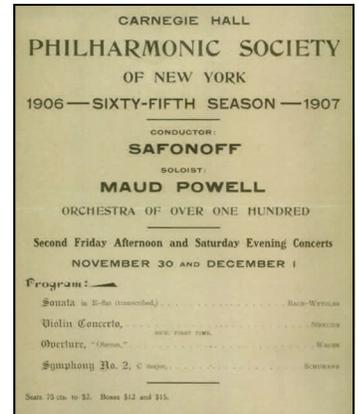
She encouraged women engaged in music clubs to take a chance on hosting her appearance in their communities. Powell won over the most unlikely audiences, and converted even the most skeptical men (including cow-punchers, miners, soldiers and businessmen) to a love of classical music. Her success persuaded women’s music clubs to host the appearance of other artists of her caliber, thus elevating the cultural appreciation of the citizens as well as blazing a trail for other artists to follow.





Powell's appearance in many cities sparked women to form and foster civic orchestras. Her willingness to return and perform as a soloist with them gave them an immense boost of confidence. In one instance, Powell's appearance in the Canadian border town of Bellingham, Washington, ignited violinist Mary Cornwall Davenport Engberg's ambition to form and conduct a civic orchestra there. Powell kept her promise to return and perform with the orchestra in 1913, a gesture they never forgot.

Powell was admired by New York critics for daring to perform repertoire that other violinists found too difficult to play. Powell introduced the Tchaikovsky and Sibelius violin concertos to America and played them into the repertoire until they are now among the most beloved of all concertos – despite the reception that bewildered New York critics first accorded the modern moods and sounds of the Sibelius violin concerto (“bitter as gall and savage as wilderness”) (“the sour and crabbed violin concerto”).



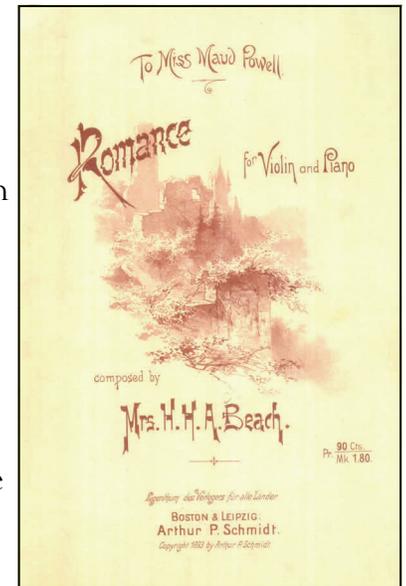
She introduced the Dvořák concerto to New York audiences with the hearty approval of the composer himself. In all, she brought forward 15 concertos by European composers (such as, Bruch, Lalo, Saint-Saëns, Aulin, Arensky) and American composers (Huss, Shelley). The African-English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor dedicated his only violin concerto to Maud Powell which she premiered at the Norfolk Music Festival (Connecticut) in 1912.



At a time when most music was heard live or not at all – before radio, television, and at the dawn of the recording era – distinguished musicians, critics, and the music-loving public eagerly awaited Maud Powell's New York recitals, knowing that she would present to them music that they had never heard before as well as the works of long-honored composers. Powell's mission to educate as well as entertain drew thousands to her concerts and won the praise of music critics and the esteem of her musical colleagues.



The violinist championed American composers, enabling their creations to be heard at a time when they were ignored by European performers and their efforts unappreciated by their own compatriots. Maud Powell dared to cross the racial barrier as the first white classical music artist to perform music by composers of African descent in recital, including her beloved and enduring transcription of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's "Deep River," which she



also recorded. She encouraged women to compose, resulting in Amy Beach's evocative "Romance" for violin and piano and Marion Bauer's "Up the Ocklawaha," a modern work arousing exceptional interest from critics.



In 1904, Maud Powell braved the terrors of the primitive recording studio and technology to become the first instrumentalist to record for the Victor Talking Machine Company's Celebrity Artist series, designated by the Red Seal Label. Her recordings became international best-sellers and through them, Americans in remote places as well as the large cities could hear the highest performance of the finest classical music right in their own homes. Her recordings helped transform musical taste and increased appreciation of the highest form of music.

Powell also foresaw that the ability to hear a piece of music more than once promised enormous possibilities for the advancement of music instruction.

Inspired by Maud Powell's example, hundreds of young girls took up the violin, filling music schools and conservatories and comprising the basis for the formation of civic orchestras in cities large and small across the country. Barred from professional orchestras, women string players took up teaching and fostered several generations of male and female string players whose energy fueled the talent pool and musical atmosphere spurring the remarkable growth of classical music in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.





Determined to do all she could for her art, the great-hearted artist performed concerts for the benefit of hospitals and schools, added special concerts for school children to her grueling schedule, and performed for every military camp in the U.S. and Canada during the First World War in addition to keeping her normal concert obligations.

Maud Powell knew that she would die with her violin in her hands. And so it was. She collapsed onstage in St. Louis with a heart attack on

Thanksgiving Day 1919. After resting for a month, she made some more recordings, and then resumed her tour schedule. But it was not to be. She died while warming up for her concert in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, on January 8, 1920. Her death shocked the musical world. She was 52.

The intelligence, energy, and vigor in Maud Powell's playing reflected her American spirit and the brilliance, optimism and enthusiasm with which she lived. Powell performed with all the great European and American conductors and orchestras of her day, knew nearly every contemporary European and American composer personally and their music, and received international acclaim as one of the greatest artists of her time as she toured from St. Petersburg, Russia, to South Africa, to North America to Hawaii.



During her short lifetime, she transformed the art of violin playing and set a new standard for performance. A legendary figure, her influence was pivotal in the development of classical music in North America.

Through her devotion to her violin, her art, and humanity, America's first great master of the violin won the love and admiration of all who fell under the spell of her commanding bow and magnetic personality. She has left us a lasting legacy.





Untimely, indeed, is this great-souled woman's passing. She was still young, had barely turned fifty and in mental and physical alertness and initiative far outdistanced many persons half her age. It seemed to all who knew her that twenty more years could scarcely exhaust her dynamic energy and unfaltering, idealistic enterprise or tarnish the splendor of her art. . . .

Maud Powell was a great violinist ~ the greatest this country has produced ~ and a great teacher, though not in any narrow pedagogical sense. . . . It is an open question whether in point of vital emotional insight and communication her interpretations of the great classics did not excel those of her one-time master, the mighty Joachim himself. Yet her musicianship, her command of the grand style, her technical resource, the superb poise and breadth of her playing ~ these things and more proclaimed her allegiance to the great instructors, who helped shape her art. Schradieck, Dancla, Joachim, Léonard ~ names to conjure with in the history of modern violin playing! Her musical taste was impeccable and her sympathies wide. But she was the relentless foe of bad music, of vicious art in general. She warred ceaselessly against it throughout her career and her successes were achieved exclusively in compositions artistically righteous in her sight.

Never will the full measure of America's debt to Maud Powell be fully known. But to the musical advancement of the country, so evident now, she contributed incalculably. Where others taught individuals she taught a nation. There is probably no obscure community in this country that she has not visited and revisited.

It is a manifest understatement of the general emotion to chronicle the death of Maud Powell as a shock to music-lovers. It is the truth so far as it goes, but it fails to express in anything like its fullness the poignant and personal sense of loss which proceeds from the untimely taking-off of a supreme and unforgettable artist.

~ *Musical America*, January 17, 1920



To the musically unlettered she played irreproachable music ~ not works above their dull comprehension, but compositions combining simplicity and merit, that subtly united charm and educative value. She broke down all artificial barriers and even addressed her audiences when occasion demanded ~ either to explain the music and whet their interest, or to rebuke them for unmannerly behavior in the concert room. As time sped, she came to be known and loved. Ministering as she did to the artistic good of America, she was still fully alive to the nation's spiritual shortcomings. And spoke her mind on them with salutary frankness.

. . .

It seems impossible that this great and beautiful personality can have gone from us! Come what other geniuses of the fiddle may, the loss of Maud Powell is irreparable.

— *Musical America*, January 17, 1920



She was not only America's great master of the violin, but a woman of lofty purpose and noble achievement, whose life and art brought to countless thousands inspiration for the good and the beautiful.

— *New York Symphony Orchestra Program Tribute, 1920*

The death of Maud Powell robs the musical world of one of the most capable and thoroughly artistic violin players of her time. She ranked with the very greatest exponents of her art, and upheld her high rank regardless of the marvelous array of astonishing violinists who visited the United States during her lifetime.

— *The Musical Observer, January 1920*

[T]he world loses an imposing musical figure . . . [She] was more than a violin virtuoso.

— *The Musical Courier, January 15, 1920*

A great artist is dead. A true American has gone from our midst. A nature richly endowed with genius, character and spirit has gone to be with the Great Musician.

— *Morning Herald, January 9, 1920*

Maud Powell was regarded by both American and European critics as the foremost woman violinist in the world and she is entitled to rank as one of the greatest musicians ever produced in the United States.

— *New York Times, January 9, 1920*

From the circle privileged to know Mme. Powell personally, will be absent one whose kindness, charm and great-heartedness, shown especially in her encouragement of the aspirants to greatness in her own line, cannot be replaced. . . . The musical world will miss an artist who for forty years has triumphed on the concert platforms of Europe, America and Africa, whose name was known from Boston to Johannesburg, from Petrograd to London. . . . Her own country came to regard her as a unique and definite force in American music. For, not content with raising the ideal of the American virtuoso abroad and at home, her pioneer instinct led her to blaze a musical trail in her American concert programs.

— *Musical America, January 17, 1920*

In whatever sky the younger stars now rising may shine at last, Maud Powell is yet America's one great master of the violin. Brilliancy of execution alone does not make a finished art. This woman laid first the foundations of character. She "scorned delights and lived laborious days." For a generation she has divided her time between almost continuous practice, study of music, public performances. She spared herself in nothing. Despising tricks, she paid the full price of high achievement, curbing an eager and impatient spirit to the sternest discipline.

Respecting her own craft, she was a tireless propagandist of music in the broader sense. Her programmes were finely wrought with treasure old and new. More than one young composer owed his first hearing to her. And a profound reverence, a true priestly power, informed her ministrations before the altar of supreme genius, like that of Beethoven.



Maud Powell was an American. She saw clearly the failures in our national art and the sources of such weakness. Referring once to successful American work in many fields, she said: "There is more of liveliness and high spirits than of spirituality. We don't live deeply enough. We depend too much on the big outer stimulus -- like a baseball game -- to rouse us. . . . We must be turned away from the things that we possess to a deeper inner life."

Being a woman, she must needs find greatness in the expression of her womanhood. Those who said she "played like a man" were deceived by the courage and intensity of her attack. There was no imitation of masculinity. When Maud Powell played, her fiddle sang for the dumb fingers of old women sewing the years into the fabric of their patience; for the hand of the bride adorning herself for her husband; for the child who holds a first doll in the small circle of her arm; for the pioneer's wife, the sailor's and the soldier's; for the lonely woman unfulfilled.

America was richer for her life. And though the strings of her violin are silent, waiting in vain for the melodious marriage of the bow, all that she gave is not lost. For the lesson of her life is not limited to the violinist. Every honest craftsman may take inspiration from a career guided by so lofty a purpose, wrought out through such faithful apprenticeship, bestowing upon others an unshadowed service whose flower was beauty and truth.

~ Robert J. Cole, *New York Sun*, January 10, 1920